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## **An Overview of Campus Climate: Dimensions of Diversity in Higher Education**

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## **An Overview of Campus Climate: Dimensions of Diversity in Higher Education**

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*Higher education scholars have increasingly studied campus climate, a term used to denote the experiences of diverse students, faculty, and staff. This article inventories the literature on the topic, including definitions of campus climate, approaches to assessing climate, and future directions for climate inquiry.*

Higher education has, in many ways, been packaged and sold as the key to social mobility in the United States and to living out the “American dream.” However, research has confirmed that access to higher education and particularly to selective colleges and universities is highly unequal (Kipp, Wohlford & Price, 2002). The students who are able to enroll in higher education institutions and faculty and staff who are hired — especially individuals from underrepresented communities — often face a chilly, unwelcoming or even hostile campus climate for diversity. The climate on campus, then, is a crucial factor in the ability of higher education institutions to recruit, enroll, and graduate a diverse student body, and hire and promote a diverse professoriate and administrative body that reflects the nation’s demographics. Over the past three decades, scholars have increasingly studied campus climate, student perceptions, and how campuses can improve their environment for diversity (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano & Cuellar, 2008; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Shenkle, Snyder & Bauer, 1998). This backgrounder will inventory the literature on this topic, including definitions of campus climate, approaches to assessing climate, and recommendations for improvement, and conclude with future directions for climate inquiry.

### **Defining Campus Climate**

Though the term campus climate can refer to both “quality of life” issues and diversity (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008, p. 222), this analysis will focus on the campus climate for diversity. Further, the terms *campus culture* and *campus climate* are sometimes used interchangeably, though climate may be one indicator of a larger culture. Some definitions focus exclusively on students or faculty, while others include the experiences of both groups (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). One commonality across multiple definitions of campus climate is an emphasis on the views and experiences of campus community members, rather than strictly the numerical presence of underrepresented or marginalized students and employees. Institutions must pay attention to far more than the numbers of diverse students they enroll and faculty and staff who are hired. Even institutions that primarily serve students of color and other diverse populations cannot assume the climate is welcoming and inclusive by default; instead, climate must be improved and sustained by design. Milem, Chang, and Antonio (2005) asserted that “educational benefits [of diversity] are not automatically bestowed on students who attend racially and ethnically diverse institutions ... [leaders] must pay close attention to the broad campus climate” (p. 13).

Campus climate has been described using a variety of descriptors: chilly, warm, hostile, open, inviting, exclusive, inclusive, welcoming, negative, healthy, and tense (Hall & Sadler, 1982; Vaccaro, 2010). Research has begun to explore the impact of climate on student, faculty, and staff recruitment, retention, and success (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen & Han, 2009; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman & Oseguera, 2008). The findings suggest that institutional climate plays a role in outcomes such as graduation and promotion and tenure. Clues to campus climate may be gleaned from an institution's mission history, physical spaces, leadership, publications, traditions, student life, critical incidents, reputation, policies, and politics. Peterson and Spencer (1990) identified three major aspects of campus climate: emphasis on "common participant views of a wide array of organizational phenomena," current belief and behavior patterns, and the "ephemeral or malleable character" of climate (p. 8). On the other hand, Rankin and Reason (2008) asserted that climate is found in the "current attitudes, behaviors, standards, and practices" of all students and employees (p. 264).

Campus climate necessitates a focus on factors beyond the numeric presence of diverse groups (Milem et al., 2005). However, the conversation routinely remains focused on these compositional metrics without addressing the psychological, behavioral, and organizational aspects of the climate. All of these aspects of climate are also affected by the sociohistorical legacy of inclusion and exclusion on the campus and governmental and policy forces. These elements are addressed in Milem, Chang, and Antonio's (2005) framework for making sense of the multitude of factors that constitute campus climate. They note that a focus on climate allows institutions to leverage the educational benefits of diversity.

Examinations of campus climate have focused on an array of campus experiences: (a) student interactions across racial groups (Saenz, Ngai & Hurtado, 2007); (b) depression among Asian American college students (Cress & Ikeda, 2003); (c) experiences of Black faculty mentoring Black undergraduates (Reddick, 2011); (d) the climate for students with disabilities (Wilson, Getzel & Brown, 2000); (e) diversity in graduate education (Griffin, Muniz & Espinosa, 2012); and (f) the academic and social experiences of African American undergraduates (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). New research affirmed the importance of focusing on differential *microclimates* experienced by students, faculty, and staff depending upon their institutional role and location (Vaccaro, 2012). Complex institutions of higher education will necessarily have more than one climate experienced by constituents. Students in one department may experience the climate differently than staff or faculty in the same discipline, and different still from other employees or undergraduate and graduate students across campus. Campus climate for specific student populations by race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors continues to be part of the research landscape in this area. While Vaccaro's (2012) study focused on the climate for LGBT students and employees, future research could extend the concept of microclimates to other social identity groups.

### **Assessing Campus Climate**

The research literature addressing campus climate often focuses on the tools used to assess the climate and subsequent results from these instruments. Still, confusion exists around the definition of climate and it is sometimes perceived as an "immeasurable construct" (Rankin & Reason, 2008, p. 263). Climate assessment and measurement tools, including survey, focus group, and interview methods, have been abundantly explored (Kuh, 1990; Milem et al., 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2005). When deciding to study the climate on campus, institutions face

several major choices in approach and methodology. These choices include participating in a multi-institutional study, working with an independent consultant or research team, developing an in-house instrument and research team, or some combination of the three.

Though some climate studies are now undertaken proactively, many campuses have studied their climate only after a highly publicized bias or hate incident. Climate reports run the risk of being studied and shelved without leading to meaningful change or improvement, despite the significant institutional resources often invested in assessment (Hurtado et al., 2008). Ideally, climate assessment drives a process of continual, data-driven improvement and prompts meaningful changes in policy and practice across campus. Key elements necessary for success when conducting a local climate study include effective planning and goal setting, securing buy-in and engagement from multiple constituencies, collaborating with campus partners, using results to create dialogue and change, and re-assessing the climate at periodic intervals to measure progress and renew investment in the process (Rankin & Reason, 2008; Worthington, 2008).

### **Approaches to Assessing Campus Climate**

While an instrument used at multiple institutions offers the benefits of a validated tool that can offer comparisons to similar colleges and universities, a tailored instrument offered by an independent researcher, or home-grown at the institution, may be able to focus on and assess specific climate issues known locally (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Although in-house research may be less costly, the prospect of bias held by internal researchers raises concern on some campuses (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Cost of a climate assessment project, which may range anywhere from \$15,000 for participation in a nationally used instrument to upwards of \$100,000 for consultants and in-house faculty and graduate student research teams, are a major concern for institutions considering the process. Institutions may also consider conducting longitudinal assessments and revisiting the climate at specific intervals.

The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) model (Hurtado et al., 1999; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012) offered by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, provided one well-known and validated comprehensive campus climate assessment system. Topics relating to climate explored in the DLE include discrimination and harassment, cross-group interaction, institutional commitment to diversity and academic validation in the classroom. Practices assessed in the DLE include student participation in co-curricular activities and support services, while outcomes addressed via the instrument include integration of learning, habits of mind, pluralistic orientation, social action and civic engagement. The Higher Education Research Institute also conducts faculty-focused and other national surveys addressing climate.

Another approach, the Equity Scorecard (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Harris & Bensimon, 2007), emphasizes awareness of inequality of outcomes and accountability for ending those inequities. The process involves examining disaggregated institutional data, creating the scorecard, determining interventions, setting goals, and sharing the findings with stakeholders. An additional approach, the transformational tapestry model (Rankin & Reason, 2008) is a five-phase “strategic model of assessment, planning, and intervention” (p. 262). Utilized by more than 70 campuses, the model incorporates a power and privilege perspective. Finally, taking a multi-institutional approach without being based at one college or university, Rankin, Blumenfeld, Weber, and Frazer’s (2010) *State of Higher Education for LGBT People*

summarizes findings from 5,149 LGBT-identified students, faculty, staff, and administrators at campuses across the country.

### **Assessment Findings and Recommendations**

Hart and Fellabaum's (2008) content analysis of 118 campus climate studies revealed that assessments are most often conducted by campus employees. Across the studies, there were multiple definitions of climate and many types of instruments used to explore experiences on campus, in and out of the classroom, and the working environment for faculty and, less often, staff members. Most studies focused on race and/or gender, with some focusing on one aspect of identity and others combining multiple identities. Hall and Sandler (1982) originally profiled the "chilly" climate for women on campus (p. 1), while studies on race have been the most common and LGBT climate studies have become much more prevalent since the late 1990s (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Campus climate studies are typically quantitative (using surveys and/or institutional research data) or use mixed methods (combining surveys or other quantitative measures with focus groups and/or interviews).

Most studies have found that groups with power and privilege on campus generally view the climate as positive, groups that are underrepresented and/or marginalized take a more negative view of the climate, and that promotion of cross-group interactions on campus usually yields positive results (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Regardless of methods used, Worthington (2008) pointed out the increasing need for campus climate researchers to focus on the scientific validity of findings and asserts a need for meta-analysis of climate studies. Given political and economic pressure for diversity efforts to demonstrate measurable results or run the risk of being eliminated, measuring and assessing the campus climate has become crucial.

Vaccaro (2010) analyzed qualitative results from a climate study at a predominantly white university to argue for the importance of disaggregating group perceptions of climate, finding that students experienced the climate and perceived campus diversity initiatives in varied ways differing by race and gender. The study examined responses to open-ended questions on the climate survey, revealing "women's desire for more meaningful diversity dialogues ... juxtaposed with men's symbolic racism, resentment of liberal bias, and hostility toward diversity initiatives" (p. 203). This portrait contrasted with "official reports that described the climate as 'positive' and 'accepting'" (p. 205). Vaccaro's findings offer important implications for students, faculty, and administrators wishing to invest in improving the climate.

### **Research-Based Recommendations to Improve Climate**

Milem et al. (2005) recommended taking a multidimensional approach to improving climate that engages all students, regardless of their identity groups. They assert that it is important to focus on process, and not just outcomes; frequently assess the climate; attempt to influence the pipeline of students and employees; re-examine policies and practices; draw upon history; support cultural spaces; hire diverse faculty; and promote intergroup relations. In calling for an improved racial climate on campus, Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1999) offer:

Institutional leaders can significantly strengthen the psychological climate on their campuses by purposefully becoming deliberate agents of socialization. They can begin by designing and implementing systematic and comprehensive educational programs to help all members of the campus community to identify and confront the stereotypes and myths that people have about those who are different from them. (p. 291)

### **Future Directions for Climate Inquiry**

Though now a well-established concept in the higher education literature, campus climate still offers fertile ground for future exploration. Numerous quantitative studies of campus climate at the institutional and national level have advanced understandings of how the student body, staff, and professoriate view climate, yet rich opportunities remain for intentionally exploring the climate using qualitative and non-traditional approaches, methods which may yield a different portrait of the campus environment than achieved through quantitative measures (Vaccaro, 2010). Indeed, only 6.7% of climate studies analyzed by Hart and Fellabaum (2008) utilized qualitative methods exclusively (p. 227). Though quantitative research may be most commonly accepted in the academy, the use or addition of qualitative methods to climate studies may paint a more vivid, detailed portrait of individuals' experiences and attitudes. Beyond the traditional focus groups and interviews, methods such as journaling, document analysis, and photo ethnography may all offer intriguing perspectives on how individuals perceive and navigate a variety of institutional climates.

Given that many campus climate studies focus only on one or two identities at a time (most commonly race or gender), there is also a need to conduct intersectional climate studies that will acknowledge the multiple identities all students, faculty, and staff experience. Additionally, a consistent focus on students and/or faculty in climate studies often leaves out the voices of staff and administrators, who often make up a large component of the campus (Mayhew, Grunwald & Dey, 2006). Finally, despite several decades of an increasing number of climate studies, little attention has focused on the specific change that climate assessment helps promote on campus. Campuses may be well served by constructing recurring, iterative processes for assessing climate, rather than administering one assessment without any follow up.

Focusing on campus climate as a critical issue in higher education affirms its important role in the recruitment, retention and success of a diverse student body, faculty, and staff. Examining the current state of campus climate research and theory, highlighting research-based best practices for improving climate, and forecasting the new developments in the field are crucial activities for institutions concerned with climate, as diversity in higher education is increasingly under assault in the current political and economic climate. Indeed, a welcoming, inclusive climate or one that is hostile, exclusive, and chilly may mean the difference in institutional success in enrolling, retaining, and promoting the success of historically and currently marginalized populations.

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